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50 MILE ENDURANCE RUN

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American River 50 keeps heading in right direction

Lure of the trail, climb to Auburn among race's many selling points.

Veteran ultra runners look back on the early days of the American River 50-Mile Endurance Run and chuckle at the now-obvious notion.

The whole thing started off backwards.

One of the American River 50's strengths is its breathtaking, dramatic climb to Auburn at the end of the race, an ascent that leaves ultra runners looking for something extra while on a friendly dirt surface.

But for the event's first two years, in **1980 and 1981**, the race started in Auburn and finished on the American River bike trail in Sacramento.

That didn't go over so well with the ultra crowd.

"Running into the sun for five hours on the bike trail is not a party," said Auburn's **Tim Twietmeyer**, a five-time Western States Endurance Run winner and an AR 50 regular.

No one wanted to get caught taking a walk break by recreational walkers, runners and cyclists passing by.

"When you're walking in the last five miles, you didn't feel like you should be walking," said **Auburn's Bill Finkbeiner**, who first ran AR 50 in 1981. *"You feel like you're really on display."*

"Then it started going uphill. I kind of liked it better that way. That uphill finish, it seemed like you're climbing Everest."

Former AR 50 race director **Greg Soderlund** noted it's easier to run the race uphill.

"The biggest thing was the heat," he said. *"You got down to the bike trail and there was no shade. Asphalt, it was hot. It's much harder to run downhill than uphill."*

AR 50 has a lot more than the right direction going for it. The point-to-point race, a qualifier for Western States, offers a mix of pavement (27 miles) and trail (23 miles) that can produce fast times and help those running in their first 50-miler have a good day.

"For a beginning 50-miler, it's a great little sampler," Twietmeyer said. *"You've got the easy stuff on the bike trail and later on it's not really a torture track."*

"This is as easy as it gets as a trail qualifier."

Cool ultra runner **Kathy Young** likes the mix of surfaces. *"I don't know if I've done any other event with a combination of that much pavement and then trail,"* she said. *"It's a really, really nice race."*

Soderlund said it's easy for runners to go out too fast on the bike trail.

"You can run the first half pretty comfortably," he said. *"When your legs are tired on the trail, you're using different muscles."*

"It's easy to make a mistake. It's easy to go out fast and not have enough left for the second half."





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But there have been plenty of fast times.

Tom Johnson set the men's course record of 5 hours, 33 minutes and 21 seconds in 1994.

Ann Trason established the women's mark of 6:09:08 in 1993.

Jim Howard, who won the first three AR 50s, ran 5:32:18 on the original course in 1981.

Since the course changed direction, the likes of

Rich Hanna (5:37:14 in 1995), **Tom Greene** (5:41:08 in 1998) and **Anton Krupicka** (5:42:37 in 2008) have recorded impressive times.

On the women's side, Trason owns four of the fastest six times, all under 6:30.

Ellie Greenwood posted the third-fastest performance in 2012 (6:18:47) and the fifth-best in 2011 (6:25:43).

The first race in 1980 drew 200 entrants. Last year's event attracted 733 starters, making AR 50 the second-largest 50-miler in the United States.

A field of 800 is expected this year for the 34th annual race on April 6.

"It's crazy how the demand has grown for the marquee events," Twietmeyer said. "People like to go to the big races. You know you're going to get taken care of."

Will Roxburgh, who owns the Fleet Feet stores in Roseville and Fair Oaks, helped put on the race from 1989-1997. The thing he remembers most vividly are those jackets given to the finishers.

"It was always big," he said. "We divvied up who's responsible for what. That was my responsibility. A lot of pressure to keep it up."

"We always held it (the jacket's design) in secret. Kind of the lure of the event."

Sacramento's **Gloria Takagishi** has run in all 33 AR50s. For her, the race's appeal centers on its beautiful course.

"We're really lucky around here," she said. "We can get out there in the wilderness and you're still just so close to everything."

The race's climb into Auburn allows runners to savor the natural beauty of the trail and anticipate the finish as spectators walk and run down to accompany friends on the final leg of the journey to the Auburn Overlook.

"The most interesting part of the race is at the end," Twietmeyer said. "It kind of takes your mind off the distance."

